

JACK O' LANTERN

Drawings by
George Wright

BY S. TEN EYCK BOURKE AND
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D'YE mean to say, Johnny, you're goin' to let 'em maroon you out on that ole Sea Shoals junk, that ain't even a proper lightship, wallowin' out there in the fog, five miles from nowhere? W'y, the ole barge's jest fixed up for the navy engineers to use for experiments with underwater signals an' such—"

Captain Casco of Ships Bottom Life Saving Station broke off to stare indignantly at little Johnny Degnan, who stood fumbling the blue slip the station wireless operator had just handed him,—his orders from the Inspector of the Barnegat Bay District to "report aboard the Sea Shoals floating light, there to remain until further orders."

"Orders is orders, an' duty's duty, Jem," Degnan began. "Course she's a hooker; but—"

Little Welsh, gunfirer and iconoclast of the life crew, interrupted scoffingly, "But Johnny's kep' company with tough luck so long he's scared he'll be lonesome if it changes. That's why he ain't kickin' none about bein' mated up with Black Tom Murden out yonder. 'Twas bad enough to make a lightship keeper out o' Murden when they fired Carlin couple o' days ago; but to mate him up with Jack o' Lantern here—"

Little Welsh pulled up short, and Casco and his mates gazed uncomfortably about the mess-room of the little white-painted life station, midway on the worst wrecking beach of the Atlantic Coast, facing the huge rollers, surging inshore over the treacherous reefs of the Gridiron of Barnegat.

DEGNAN'S ill luck—Jack o' Lantern Degnan, as Ships Bottom had nicknamed the little Government steeplejack, charged with the high-up repairs of lighthouse and lightship lamps, and the Government wireless that dotted the Barnegat coast—was traditional on the beach. How he had managed to hold down his job during his brief and blundering career in the Barnegat Bay district was a puzzle to the burly surfmen. And with reason.

Why, it was when Degnan was overhauling the Beachy Head lighthouse that the thousand-pound "whirligig weights" that furnish the rotary power for the lamps came away, turning the light from a flash to a fixed, and nearly running the Seneca revenue cutter ashore—Degnan it was, trying out Ships Bottom's new motor when the battery feed balled up, stranding the big storm fighter at sea—and Degnan, again, had tuned up the department wireless, till the half-crazed operator was receiving messages from the British Isles, or Borneo, or anywhere except headquarters and the short line navy circuit. Those were merely samples.

Nevertheless, the brawny coastguards treated him with tolerant friendliness—"Jack o' Lantern's so blamed misfort'ni!" Even the Inspector seemed sorry for him; for Degnan was only officially reprimanded and transferred to a less desirable job—where the same unkind Nemesis promptly followed him, up coast and down.

Only once did the record vary,—a few days before, when fierce windblasts, driving inshore, wrenched the Harvey Cedars lighthouse, tearing the circular staircase loose from its holdings, leaving great, yawning gaps. Degnan, with the deftness of his trade, scaled the tower in a pair of lineman's spurs, in the half gale, and, clad only in shirt and trousers, kept the lamps going throughout the bitter night, until the fallen staircase inside could be repaired; thereby probably saving more than one coastwise vessel from breaking her back on the treacherous reefs of the Ships' Graveyard, and incidentally earning him the Brotherhood of the Beach.

It was on the heels of the Harvey Cedars feat that the "Kidnappin' Order" had come, setting the crew of Ships Bottom in revolt. Apart from its apparent injustice, they were aware of bad blood between little Degnan and flashy Tom Murden, reputed master and owner of the fast power schooner Annie Belle, and of the cause,—a very pretty cause with blue eyes and flirtatious ways, over in Barnegat village; by name, Miss Annabel Mallory.

Maybe Johnny Degnan only puzzled her,—a quality more fascinating to any woman than mere physical comeliness. Ships Bottom, however, hoped it was more; for to a man they distrusted Tom Murden, for all his spendthrift ways, and were uneasily conscious that the latter viewed the mild-mannered little steeplejack as an obstacle to be removed from the path of his lovemaking.

IF you wasn't so eternal stubborn 'bout keepin' it quiet how them Harvey Cedars chumps let their ladder flop, I'd quick wise up headquarters 'twasn't fair to hold to that order after what you done!" the indignant keeper of Ships Bottom growled.

A look of apprehension flashed into Degnan's eyes. The men, as they stamped into the boathouse to run out the big lifeboat that was to take him seaward, remembered it was just such a look as they had seen for the first time on his face during all his ill starred career at Barnegat, when, the dangers of that night at Harvey Cedars over, Jack o' Lantern Degnan had promptly sworn all concerned to secrecy. Subsequently they swore on their own account.



The Snarl on Murden's Dark Face Did Not Bear Him Out.

"Mebby the rev'nue department knows its business," Degnan returned mildly. "Mebby they're sendin' me out with Tom, 'cause two men kin easier keep cases on that slippery cable'n one. 'Twas the cable runnin' out that stranded that bark Myrtle under Carlin's nose, I heard."

Casco, still nursing his angry disapproval over Degnan's unaccountable modesty, answered sullenly, "Sea Shoals Light's cable it was. Carlin said he wasn't lookin'—never spotted it in the dark. The Light's s'posed to be anchored on the nor'ard end o' the shoals; so, when she slipped back fifty fathom or so, it left the sandy reef unguarded. The bark—deep loaded she was or she wouldn't of grounded—nacherly took the shoals, thinkin' they was in deep water soundings, off the lightship's bow. That ain't no reason you should be shanghaied on her," the stubborn coastguard persisted.

Degnan, equally but more mildly obstinate, shrugged and turned to a curious little contrivance, with gong attachment and an earpiece like a telephone's, that hung on the station wall. "This the submarine bell ap'ratus that Carlin signaled with?" he began. "T'other end's on the light?"

A hail from downshore interrupted him. "Come on, sence you're so set on duty," Casco growled, striding down the beach. "You'll be bangin' that bell afore you been aboard long!" he savagely predicted.

JACK O' LANTERN DEGNAN had time to think over his undesirable assignment, while Ships Bottom's forty-horsepower lifeboat snored and slashed seaward into a heavy sea, with Casco at the tiller, and the crew crouched forward in their drenched slickers. A few desultory questions elicited the information that there was no other means of communication between the outlying lightship and the shore save the wireless submarine bell, installed by the engineer corps,—a signaling apparatus based on the principle that vibrations of the water will convey messages as well as the air will carry wireless signals.

Immersed in thought, Degnan's face assumed a curious, twisted smile that made the grim-visaged life Captain, driving seaward through a shower of spume and vaporous smoke, involuntarily swing around, alert for some impending peril. There was only the shimmering speck ahead where the shoals lightship lay, still hull down on the horizon, lurching her top-heavy lamp mast. Jack o' Lantern knew that high-sided, white-lettered hulk, on her lonely sea post, seldom visited, save by the supply ship at long intervals.

"What I'm milling over, Jem lad," Degnan answered the lifeguard's questioning glance, "Why did Tom Murden git after this lightship job? Course, bein' so short handed, the department ain't refusin' most any able-bodied man; but Tom's power schooner was fetchin' him in a bankroll. He flashed it in Barnegat village free enough, so I heard."

Captain Casco swung the lifeboat up to meet a giant roller, and fell off on his course again before he answered, with a cynical smile that expressed his opinion of the lightship keeper:

"Murden says he lost her—crew libeled her up in 'York, he says. Nobody wanted the job when Carlin was fired—Murden said he needed it, an' he knows the shoals. He's run over 'em times enough in that sneakin' windjammer of his. She kin go most anywhere—where the Rev'nue can't follow," Casco grimly added.

Degnan, gazing forward, was no longer listening. He was watching a gleam that shone redly over the lightship, bobbing at her anchors, a mile away. Suddenly he sprang up, regardless of the pitching boat.

"Look, Jem!" he said in a breathless whisper. "What d'ye see there on the light?"

"The sun flickerin' on the lamp," Captain Casco said, with a surprised look at the little steeplejack. "She ain't lit up yet."

"Then the sun's telegraphin' Morse. There's someone on top too—Murden, o' course. Signalin' to sea!" Degnan checked himself, with a quick glance at the life Captain; but the lifeboat was close aboard the wallowing lightship now, and Casco

was not paying much attention. He wanted to get a bad business over with and get back.

Degnan forced a laugh, the curious little laugh that had puzzled Big Jem before. "Say, Jem," he said casually, "don't let on to Murden about Harvey Cedars. Murden'd think I was braggin'—'count o' Annabel—Miss Mallory," he finished lamely. "There's Murden now," he added with almost an exclamation of relief, as the big Captain nodded sulkily. "Don't he look glad to see me?"

THE scowl on Murden's dark visage, as he glared over the bulwark down into the boat, did not bear out Degnan's statement. Neither did his subsequent contemptuous bearing, when the lifeboat had cast off, leaving the two lightkeepers looking askance at each other on deck. The converted navy barge was heaved short up, creaking and groaning.

"Come to overhaul the lamps, did ye?" returned the former schooner master to Degnan's explanation of his orders to report on board the lightship—orders obviously distasteful to the other. "They might have sent me a real man if they thought I needed help. Better leave the lamps to me, or you'll be balling 'em up like you mucked up everything you took hold of 'longshore. You can sleep both watches, for all I care."

Then, having welcomed his confrere, the black-browed keeper went aloft, where he seated himself on the swaying lamp top, looking out to sea. Plainly he took small stock in his new shipmate, whose reputation he knew. Degnan, still wearing his little twisted smile, slipped into the cramped cabin aft. There was nothing of interest above, save the bare deck, broken by a big hatchway amidships, and the lonely sea.

"Glad Casco didn't notice that slip about the sun telegraphing Morse. Just the same, I'd like to a seen more o' them sun flickerin's," he said, tossing his slender dunnage on a bunk, and transferring some heavy object to his hip pocket. He chuckled, thinking of Murden's permission to sleep both watches.

"She's laying on and off—Murden fixed that when he spotted us. He won't light up for keeps till the fog comes in—he'll just watch out for suspicious craft. I got time!"

He slipped out of his peajacket; then, with deftness foreign to his usually bungling fingers, he searched the lazarette and the untidy lockers of the cabin. Finally he found and slid back a panel in the forward bulkhead, opening into the hold. After a cautious look from the ladder, to be sure Murden was still aloft, he flashed the light of a pocket lamp and dived into the hold, still soliloquizing softly—a habit born of his trade.

He was back shortly. "Inspector's right; I can get up both ways, case of— Hello! Somebody's coming in a hurry. He's sighted something—the schooner, I bet!"

The sound of Murden's heavy footfalls on deck made him close the bulkhead panel and glance hastily round to assure himself that everything was in place. Then he started up the companionway—to find it blocked by Murden's bulky form. Black Tom's face wore an ugly scowl which told of inward turbulence.

"There's some yacht fellers comin' aboard—out o' gasoline. They signaled for it when I lit up aloft, 'count o' the fog," Murden said. "What you doin' down here so long? I reckon you been snoopin'! I'll l'arn ye!"

The keeper might have planned his action, or given way to sudden rage. The blow fell before Degnan could

dodge. He rolled down the ladder, a thousand stars dancing before his eyes, and he heard Murden slam and bolt the hatch cover.

"I didn't think he'd do it so quick," Degnan muttered, and scrambled to his feet half dazed, but grinning. "Thinks he's got me juggled!"

He caught the chugging of a boat alongside and the muffled voices of men, evidently handling something bulky, on the landward side of the lightship. The hurried scuffling overhead was punctuated by a heavy thump which brought him fully to his senses.

"Thought first 'twas the cutter's gun. They've got the main hatch off, dumping something into the hold. Oh, I'm onto you, Tom Murden! You hatched out a bully smugglin' scheme when Carlin got fired!" He listened a moment eagerly. "Working fast, they are, caching the stuff aboard! Then they'll go ashore when the launch's empty, an' the schooner'll trail off empty an' innocent too—that's what they think! But there's me an' Casco, an' I do hope the U. S. cutter's snoopin' outside somewhere! Anyhow, if I can't get out, I can talk out!" he chuckled. "Casco won't be a crowd."

He had taken a small case from under a roll of canvas in the cabin locker, exposing a submarine signaling instrument, similar to the one at Ships Bottom station, and with practised fingers had connected to it a coil of insulated wire. He pressed the key of the sending apparatus—and checked a cry of dismay. A deep chiming note had come simultaneously from outside the ship. Degnan knew what that was,—the corresponding alarm of the big gong fastened to the ship's side, which sped the vibrations through five miles of sea water to Ships Bottom life saving station. He was caught in his own trap!

FOR an instant he stood listening, a cold feeling in the region of his belt, as he glanced from the hatch to the panel in the bulkhead. "I practised bungling too

peajacket! He remembered it, when the cold wind struck him as he swarmed up the shrouds.

"There you are again! Looks like I always got to go aloft an' do my duty in my shirt an' pants," he grumbled.

He was already perched on the lamp top, when Murden and half a dozen others piled yelling out of the galley. Degnan stopped the first man who started aloft with the waving black automatic.

"Not today, unless you want a ten-shot Donnybrook!" he jeered, and grinned at the volunteer's haste to rejoin his comrades, excitedly conferring on deck. Obviously they were pressed for time.

Round the hatchway Degnan saw more bundles and boxes scattered, and the smugglers' launch dipping and ducking alongside. "Oh, there ain't no doubt about Murden's illicit trade. An'—I thought so—that's the Annie Belle out there, just come up from South. I'd know her clean-cut lines anywhere," he said, staring through the white mist at the black schooner lying a cable's length away. And—what was that beyond?

Was there something else out there? He peered into the sea fog; but the glare from the lamps Murden had lighted blinded him momentarily.

"You Degnan!" Murden hailed him from below. "What kind o' sneakin' game you got buttin' in what don't concern you?" The smuggler's upturned face was convulsed with rage. "What fool business you up to, anyhow?"

Degnan nursed the big black automatic. "Business of the U. S. Rev'nue Service! What kind of a lightship keeper are you anyhow, Tom Murden? What business you got plantin' smuggled stuff aboard a gov'ment ship?" he mocked defiantly.

For a moment he stared down in the ominous silence that followed, inwardly half tempted to start something—anything that would hold the smugglers for a space. If Casco had received the interrupted message, he must be more than halfway out by now. And, any-

they had me a minute ago—if on'y Casco shows up!"

There was no sign of the Ships Bottom lifeboat in the gathering darkness shoreward. The smugglers were already tumbling into the launch, which still clung to the lightship's side—waiting for someone?

"Wonder why Murden don't go along? I got no objections," Degnan said, grinning. Casco or the cutter was sure to get 'em all!"

Next moment he knew. A clanking came from below, the ominous sound of capstan pawls, and a sudden shower of sparks. The chain cable, cast loose, was grating out of the hawsehole! And the smuggling schooner was head on for the drifting lightship's bow, following her as she made sternway, tolling on the cutter! The chain cable ran off the winch like a rope on a reel, as the big rollers swept back the lightship from her proper station, leaving the long ridge of sand unguarded, like a submerged hedge, paralleling the distant shoreline.

Degnan sprang up with a shout of rage. The schooner could safely pass that hidden reef; but the deep draft revenue cutter—destruction, sure and certain, maybe men's lives, hung in the balance for her!

"The Seneca's bound to strike and break her back, just like that bark did when Carlin went adrift. The schooner'll pick up the launch, and the whole gang will go clear!" The thought maddened him into action. But what to do? He was helpless—

HE was on his feet, raging, planning, when Murden darted aft, under the shadow of the bulwark, stopped amidships, swung round, and a red streak shot upward.

A fiery pain seared Degnan's shoulder, numbing his whole arm. He heard the thump of his pistol as the weapon struck the deck, and Murden's mocking laugh, as the smuggler made for the waiting launch, a menacing figure, shaking his fist in the glare of the lamps.

"That'll square accounts, Mr. Secret Service Agent!"

Murden cried. "Part for interferin' an' part for foolin' me good an' proper! You and your Revenue, an' your lamp jack job!"

Degnan, dumb with pain, was swaying dizzily when the lightship brought up with a savage lunge that nearly tossed him from the top. At the same moment the schooner, like a black phantom, passed under her bows, going shoreward. The murderous shoals waited for the cutter.

For an instant despair seized upon him. Murden's sneering laugh still rang in his ears, like a knell. Yes, he was a secret agent, a trusted man in the Revenue Service, sent to compass the capture of Murden and his gang, long suspected by the department, but who had always eluded them. He had spent bitter months of hard work, painstakingly, at his adopted trade, winning a reputation for blundering, to disarm Murden's suspicions, against the very emergency that had come; which he had prepared for, only to culminate now in ignominious defeat, when success had seemed certain! For himself, dying for all he knew, on the swaying masthead of a barren lightship, in the ocean night, he did not care; but with the unsuspecting cutter rushing to her doom all was lost! He saw her now, a gleaming splash of yellow and white and the men crowded forward, officers on the bridge.

To save the cutter, that was his one thought. To warn her of the trap set—and so save all! And with the thought came inspiration. Code her, use the lamps as a semaphore, as Murden had done to warn off the smuggling schooner, when he spotted the outcoming lifeboat!

He snatched for the lapels of his coat, and groaned to find it gone. His roving eye glimpsed folded canvas inside the lamp frame, and his heart leaped.

"The lamp cover! By George! I'll do it yet!" He was frozen with his long vigil aloft—only his arm burned and jumped like a million toothaches. But Jack o' Lantern Degnan clawed and tore at the door of the big glazed light, in unmerciful agony, but with joy in his heart.

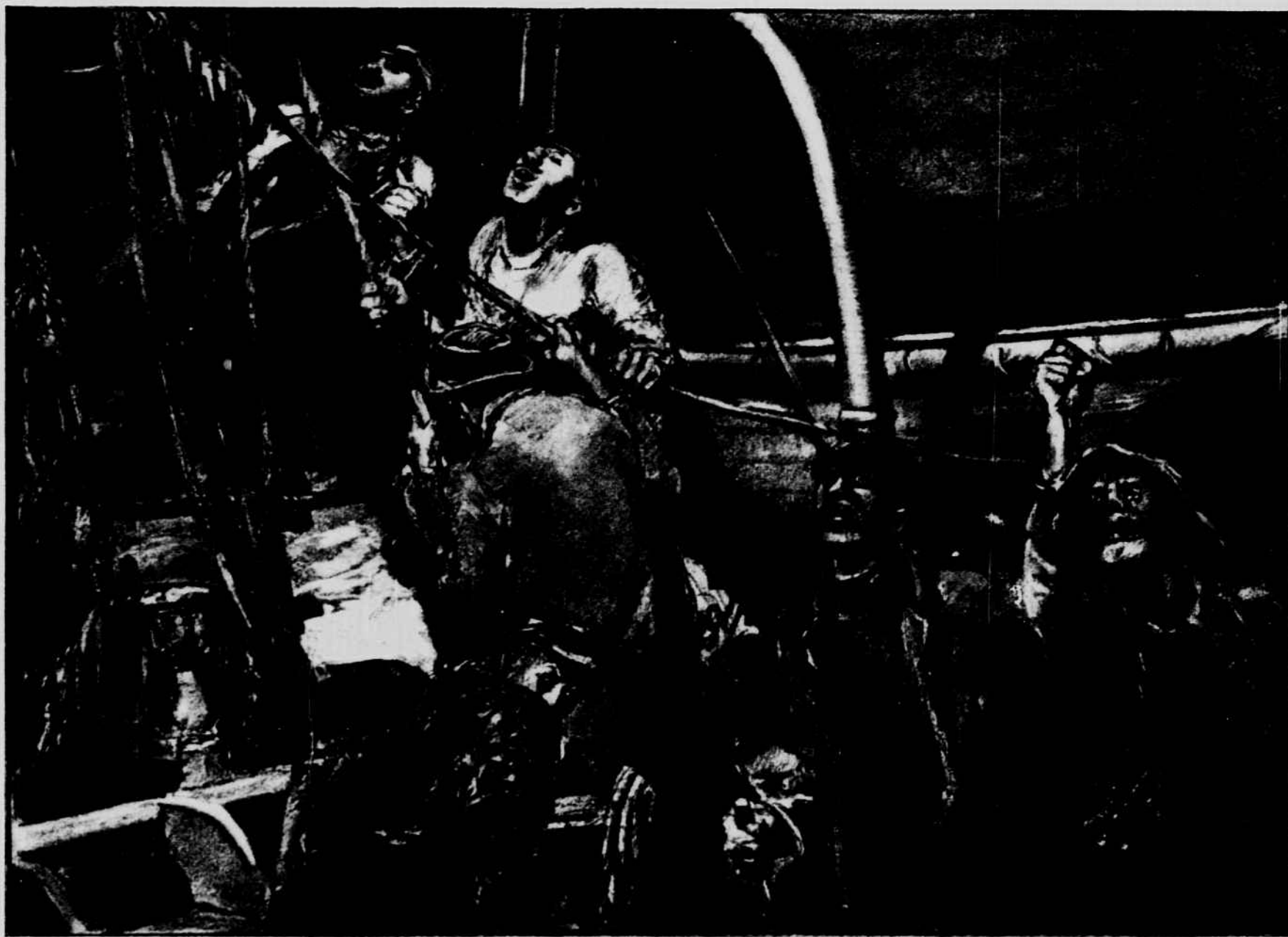
A stifling blast struck him as he lunged inside. The heat and poisonous vapors choked him. He went blind in the glare of the lamps; but he found what he wanted,—the big canvas shroud that slipped down over shades and metal feeders to the floor. That would do it—fine!

"First froze stiff, an' beat up, an' shot up, an' burned alive—an' now I'm goin' to violate maritime law, dousing a sea light—I know! Just the same I'm goin' to have the last laugh, Mr. Murden!"

The fumes caught him; but his head held to his one thought,—to signal the Seneca. He had to stop and peer out, to pick up the lights of the onrushing revenue cutter in the fog and gloom seaward before he started, signal flashing from his extemporized semaphore. She was fearfully near, and every second counted.

"That's east'ard—I see her!" he muttered thickly. Next moment he was waving the canvas cover before the lamps, blinding the light to seaward, then showing it again, long and short intervals alternating, to take

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"Why Are You Buttin' in on What Don't Concern You?" Murden Shrieked.

much ashore—that gang's sure to know who did that! Time I was getting out!"

He slid back the panel, waiting. They were coming. Heavy seaboots pounded on the deck, and he heard Murden's voice shouting orders and curses in the same breath, as he fumbled at the cabin door. "There's nobody 'tween decks—good for them!" said Degnan grimly.

He had not time to close the panel. The pack was howling at his heels as he hurdled the packages and boxes piled under the open hatch in the gloom of the ill smelling hold—packages with foreign labels—dodging Uncle Sam's customs, scores of 'em!

He knew what he had to expect from Tom Murden and his gang of smugglers, just as well as he knew the leader's plot—and that maybe he had already transhipped thousands of dollars' worth of smuggled goods from his predatory schooner to the neglected lightship, where they could lie in comparative security until dribbled ashore in small boats. A daring scheme—if successful.

Two or three men on deck dodged back before the blood smeared apparition that shot up the galley ladder, waving an ugly black automatic pistol. Degnan had already formed his plans—at least for a temporary standoff of the smugglers. But he had forgotten his

way, now he was sure of the white speck seaward, topped by rolling clouds of smoke. The revenue cutter, steaming in as to a rendezvous! "Schooner smelt her out—that's what rushed 'em!"

Murden saw her at the same moment. He sprang to the rail, frantically waving his cap at the schooner. As though obeying previous orders, she swung gracefully toward the lightship, bow on. Degnan laughed. With Casco coming the smugglers were blocked from land and sea!

"Too late!" he called down. "I got you euchred two ways for Sunday. May as well stay aboard, Tom Murden, unless you fellows want to dodge bullets. The tables are turned—Ah!"

IT was Degnan who did the dodging first. With a whiplash crack a bullet clipped the thick lens of the lamp at his head, buzzing over him like a big bumblebee. Murden ran into the gloom of the forepeak, and Degnan, wriggling round flat on the top, glimpsed the black schooner coming on, shearing the sea in white waves with her sharp bow.

"But the Rev'nue's right on her heels! It's the old hound dog Seneca I tried to sink off Beachy Head, keeping up my reputation for blundering." Jack o' Lantern grinned. "We got 'em between two fires, just where



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JACK O' LANTERN

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the place of dots and dashes of the heliograph.

"Let's see. What's—oh, I remember. Flash—flash—flash—long blank—flash. Slipped cable. Reef exposed. Now what the deuce is—I know! Long blank—flash—blank—flicker—flash. Swing wide. Reef ahead."

He was signaling by navy code, almost forgotten, working madly with the heavy canvas, fiercely holding himself together, by sheer will forcing his wounded arm to do its work.

"Swing wide. Reef exposed. That'll put a joker on your game, Mr. Murden! Flash—flicker—flicker—I'll have to Morse it. Smugglers in launch—swing wide reef—Glory! there goes her siren! Two shorts—short—three shorts—O. K. . . . Casco sighted. Hurroo! We've got the whole crowd lashed to the mast!"

JACK O' LANTERN DEGNAN was all in. His duty done, he crumpled on hands and knees, crawling blindly about till he found the door, seeking a way out of the inferno of gases and heat.

He was half conscious of a white light that played on the lamp top. The calcium of the Seneca swept the whole length of the lightship. With droning siren the Government ship passed the sunken shoals in a wide arc. Degnan sighed contentedly.

"Fooled 'em!" he murmured.

The treacherous sand trap Tom Murden had laid with such devilish ingenuity and foresight had failed. Degnan vaguely saw the white shaft pick up the fleeing schooner. His last conscious survey brought a grim chuckle as he lay there spent, bleeding, and breathless. The big white motorboat filled with burly life savers in sou'westers had closed in on a black launch, cutting her off from the shore! And they had made a clean roundup!

"Casco's got the smugglers an' Murden; the cutter's got the schooner, an' I got about forty-seven cases of smuggled cigars, an' a whole raft of—"

"Ribbons and laces, to set off the faces Of pretty young sweethearts—and wives!"

It's a whirligig world! Wonder what—my Annie's doin' now?" said Jack o' Lantern sleepily.

CASCO and the cutter's officer found him, with bruised head and useless arm, in the cramped cabin of the lightship, industriously shivering in his attempt to frame his "Report to the Inspector." The officer could only stare; but Casco promptly gathered him in.

It had been a strenuous time for J. Degnan, special secret agent of the United States Revenue Service, detailed to "reckon up" the big Barnegat smuggling case. Of ensuing events, after the advent of the two men, and of the transshipment of Murden and his smuggling crew, the securing of the smuggled goods on the lightship, Degnan knew as little as he knew of his own flying trip ashore in the white lifeboat, in blissful unconsciousness.

Two days later, however, in a new blue uniform with glittering brass, he stood in the messroom of the life station, patiently answering the admiring life Captain's volley of questions.

"Course it was a put up job all around," he said. "Murden had fooled the department every time; so they reckoned the only way to trap him was to put a blunderin' little runt he just couldn't suspicion as bein' there to spy on him—and lights are good look-outs! But after all 'twas Providence played the winning hand for the department. Murden couldn't a figured beforehand on Carlin's blunder—but when it came he jumped to his opportunity, and his finish! Great scheme, though!"

Casco nodded. "Is it right, what I hear about you quittin' the beach service? How about Annabel?" he demanded bluntly. The big coast guard was godfather to half the pretty girls of Barnegat village, and had a right to ask.

"There isn't anything left to keep me in Barnegat any longer now," Degnan said gloomily.

Casco stared. "Tom Murden's out o' the way. You mean Annabel won't—"

"Annabel Mallory will never marry a Jack o' Lantern, Jem," Degnan interrupted. Then he grinned broadly. "Miss Mallory's engaged to an officer in the Rev'nue Navy Service, a new, full-fledged Lieutenant on the Seneca."

"Who?" demanded Casco.

"Me!" Degnan said. "Why don't you salute your superior officer, Jem?"



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